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C O N F I D E N T I A L MINSK 000009

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [BO](#)
SUBJECT: Media Mistaken: Partnership Will Observe Elections

Ref: A) 05 Minsk 1437 B) 05 Minsk 1527

Classified by Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: On January 4, Emboffs met with civil initiative Partnership director Nikolai Astreiko to inquire about press reports that Partnership would not be monitoring the March presidential elections. Astreiko stated that Partnership plans to observe the entire electoral process, and proceeded to describe a new long-term observation strategy and Partnership's post-election goals. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On January 4, USAID Country Representative and Poloff met with civil initiative Partnership director Nikolai Astreiko to determine if there was any veracity to the press reports that Partnership would not monitor presidential elections.

The Truth of the Matter Is

¶3. (C) Astreiko informed Emboffs that Partnership has every intention to observe the entire electoral procedure - from signature gathering through the March 19 presidential elections. Astreiko explained that the news article that said that Partnership would not monitor the elections was incorrect. This story started to circulate after Astreiko held a press conference to present Partnership's new election observation strategy. Some of the journalists who attended the press conference left early and then inaccurately reported Astreiko's statements in the news.

New Observation Strategy Leading Up to the Election

¶4. (C) Astreiko explained that as of January 1, Partnership has launched a long-term decentralized observation strategy that will run through the end of March. Under this more flexible observation system, 170 volunteers will work in 158 districts in Belarus and report back to Minsk about violations that they witness in all phases of the electoral process - from candidate registration to signature collections to agitation campaigns.

¶5. (C) Instead of the biweekly reporting that Partnership

did for the 2004 parliamentary elections, Astreiko explained that Partnership will produce four reports from January to the end of March on its observations. Despite recent amendments to the criminal code that make it prohibitively dangerous to report any information that may discredit Belarus (ref A), Partnership plans make its first report available on its website (www.partnerstva.org) and to distribute it via newsletter starting on January 20. Astreiko hopes that the independent media will pick up the reports from the Internet or the news bulletin and distribute the information more widely.

Election Day Observation Strategy

¶16. (C) Astreiko explained that Partnership plans to have 3,500 independent observers work in pairs to observe the five days of early voting and voting on election day. [Note: Astreiko's proposed number of observers is half of the 7,000 Partnership originally expected to field for the presidential elections. The GOB's intimidating actions during the 2004 parliamentary elections and the call for early elections have made it difficult for Partnership to find volunteers for election observation.] The observers will cover 25 percent of all polling stations in large cities and small villages throughout Belarus.

¶17. (C) Partnership plans to start registering its election observers with the GOB early since Astreiko fully expects that the GOB will reject half of the observer applications. [Note: Given that Partnership is not a registered organization -- it never had legal status, but until October it was allowed to operate as a "civic initiative" -- Partnership volunteers must be nominated to be election observers through already registered organizations or through voter signature collection.] Instead of having all the potential observers apply for certification from the GOB at once, Astreiko wants applicants who are rejected or NGOs whose nominations were refused to apply repeatedly until they receive GOB approval.

Looking Ahead: Goals for Post-Election Activities

¶18. (C) After the elections, Partnership plans to focus its efforts on advocacy. In the two months after the elections, Astreiko said that Partnership would work to distribute the "real results" of the presidential elections and a list of the violations that occurred during the election process. In the long run, Partnership will look to find new members to create a socially active group whose goal will be to defend people's rights.

Comment

¶19. (C) Astreiko expressed much more confidence in Partnership's prospects for election monitoring and the future of the organization than his deputy Enira Bronitskaya did two weeks earlier (ref B). Although admittedly tired after two weeks in prison (he was released on December 29), Astreiko seemed ready to take on the ambitious task of condensing the seven-month election observation plan into three. Launching a new election observation strategy days after being released from prison demonstrated the type of resiliency the organization needs to survive under intense pressure from authorities in Belarus. Astreiko's long-term plans indicate that he expects Partnership to be a strong advocate for protection of Belarusian citizens' rights in the future.

PHLIPOT